[Speaking of Credit]

Mari Tomasi Writers' Section Files

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SPEAKING OF CREDIT

The customer took change from her purse and laid it beside the dollar bill on the counter. A half-dollar, a quarter, two dimes and three pennies. She counted the money again, pointing to the bill and to each coin with a stout, work-worn finger whose nail was broken and jagged, but clean. The young man behind the counter was wrapping a pair or gray corduroy work pants. His red hair made brightness in the somber corner of the store where men's clothing was sold.

“Joe'll like them, Mrs. Gabrielli,” he assured her in a friendly way. “My father has a couple of pairs he's used in the shed all winter. Says he likes them better than the woolen ones-"

“Well, I take them anyway,” Mrs. Gabrielli said. “If Joe he likes them, then I come back and get another pair.”

The clerk must have heard the clatter of the coins on the counter, but he asked, “You want them charged?”

“No, no. I pay now-"

He flattened the neatly wrapped package and snipped the twine. “How's Angela's ankle? I haven't seen her pass on her way to school the last few days.”

“Oh, it get better. It get better. Tomorrow she starts to school again. I try to make her give up this crazy idea 2 of sports all the time - basketball, baseball. Pretty soon maybe it will

be football for girls, too. Once she used to say she wanted to teach English when she is finished with school. Now she says no, she wants to be the sports teacher. I say to her, 'To be a sports teacher is all right when you're very young, but what will you do later?' She only laughs and says, 'Get married.'"

The clerk said, “You're Almo was a good athlete. We played some good football our senior year in high school-"

“Hah, but that one had brains. Football was all right for high school, but once he is finished with school he turned to real work. Work he can do all his life.”

“He's still in Quincy?”

She nodded. “With my brother. He got a fine place there where they retail monuments. Right now business is not so good, but he thinks in a month it will pick up. For Memorial Day, you know. Always Almo is asking his father in his letters to come out there; but Joe, I guess be wants to stick in the sheds all his life-"

After the woman had been escorted to the door, the clerk returned and perched on the counter. “We've lots of customers like Mrs. Gabrielli,” he began. “Women who come in to buy work clothes for their husbands. The men aren't fussy about work clothes. Anything'll do. When it comes to buying a good suit they come in themselves-" his wide mouth broke into a grin “but accompanied by their wives. And ten to one they don't pick out a suit unless the wife likes it, too. Believe me, it's harder to suit two people than one. 3 “This Mrs. Gabrielli's son and I went to school together. Grades and high school. He was one of the best football men we had. Good in his studies, too. He won a scholarship but he never used it. Wanted to get to work right away. You heard what Mrs. Gabrielli said. He's in Quincy selling monuments. I remember that June we graduated, I had this clerking job handed to me by an uncle. Almo wasn't as lucky. He loafed all summer and by fall he was desperate enough to take any kind of work. He's the kind of fellow who hates hanging around all day. He could have found work in the quarries or sheds, but Joe Gabrielli and

his wife said no to that. Finally he was asked out to Quincy with an uncle. He's been there ever since. It's four years now. I'm still clerking, with only a fourth-hand Ford to show for it. Holidays Almo rolls home in a new Chrysler. But he deserves it. He always was a plugger.

“Now his sister Angela, she's different. She's a nut on basketball. She's a small, brown, wiry thing. Doesn't look especially athletic. I'm waiting for the day she puts her foot down and insists upon going to physical training school. She'll win. You'll see. Joe Gabrielli and his wife will tear and rant at her, but she'll finally get her own way.

“My father-Henry MacPherson-and Joe Gabrielli work in the same shed. My father's a sand blaster. Joe- I don't know what he does. Joe's like the usual run of Italian married stonecutters. Works hard, likes to air his views on Italian and American politics, and likes his grappa and wine. When my father was abed with a cold last month. Joe sent over a quart of grappa and told my father to take a cup - half coffee 4 and half grappa- every four hours until the quart was gone. The stuff's dynamite, but not bad tasting. Joe makes it every year from grape mash. He's never without it.

“When Almo was in high school he'd sneak out a bottle for the gang. It wouldn't take much to get us feeling good. The young fellows don't go much for grappa. It's beer for us, or the other hard drinks. Grappa was popular during prohibition. These Italians'd order carloads of grapes. They'd make wine. From the grape mash they'd make the grappa. Some of them did a thriving business. There aren't many of them bother to make wine and grappa now except for their own use at home.

“Half of our customers are women like Mrs. Gabrielli. They think it's a disgrace to have their purchases charged for even a week. They want to pay for their goods when they buy them. If they haven't the money, they don't buy. They wait. They wait until they have the money.

“Some, of course, are more modern than Mrs. Gabrielli. The stores in town are practically dependent on customers connected in some way with the granite business. They're glad

to extend credit. Where would the stores be if the stonecutters' families took it into their heads to do their shopping in other towns? They'd have to close up. If it wasn't for the granite industry there wouldn't be anything to keep the people in Barre. Barre'd be like any other lazy Vermont town.

“Speaking of credit, these stores gave plenty of credit during the strike of '22. From what I hear, most of the customers have paid up these bills. When there was talk a few years back 5 of another strike, the larger stores got together and tried to agree on refusing credit during the strike period, thinking that it would kill the strike before it was started.

My father was in the strike of '22. He never says much about it. I'm Scotch-Irish. My grandfather was Scotland-born. Old Enoch MacPherson. You still hear his name mentioned in town. One of the best quarriers Barre's had. I don't remember much about him except that he was a tall gaunt man with red whiskers. Always in need of a shave. Wore a heavy moustache, too. It fell over his mouth like a falls. He used to get razzed about it a lot. He didn't care. He said it was a health measure. My grandmother used to beg him to cut it off. He said it wasn't any worse than her boiling sugar and water to a thick syrup and spreading it on a sheet of paper to catch flies. She made fly-catchers with syrup; he used whiskers and moustache for dust-catchers. He said the beard held the dust and kept it from his nose and mouth. He wore his whiskers up to the day he died.

“They say old Enoch MacPherson could guess the weight of a granite block to within five pounds. They had some kind of a celebration here in Barre years back, before I was born. They put ten pieces of granite on a table, all different grades of granite. Then the quarriers and stonecutters were blindfolded and they were asked to tell by the feel which granite was the best piece. Old Enoch won the ten dollars.

“Enoch used to sing us a song the quarrymen had sung in Scotland when he was young. I don't remember the words. It wasn't the gay, rollicking song you'd expect. It sounded like 6 a hymn. Low, with a monotonous tune. It was about most men needing a God only for their

souls, but that a quarryman needed two. One for his soul, and one to guide his hands and feet in the quarries. My father says it used to give old Enoch's wife the shivers every time he sang it.”

A new customer claimed the clerk's attention. He was a boy of eleven or twelve. Dark, lively. “My old man wants a toque like the one he bought last week,” he told the clerk. 'A red one. He lost the other one last night.”

“How'd he lose it?” the clerk asked.

“Oh, up near the cemetery. He's been shoveling snow up there all week. He said the sun come out good and hot for a little while yesterday, so he took his toque off. When he looked for it, it was gone. Buried in the snow, I guess. I'm glad it wasn't me that lost a toque. He'd have skinned me-"

“How's the skating these days?” the clerk asked.

“Aw. there's too much snow,” the boy complained. “When there isn't snow, it thaws. So what you going to do? I guess the best weather for skating is over-"

He crammed the package the clerk handed him in his mackinaw pocket. “The old man said he'll come in and pay for it pay-day-"

The clerk grinned after the boy's back. “His people are more modern-minded than Joe Gabrielli and his wife. He's an Irish kid. His father works for the city. Doesn't make very much to keep a family of four kids going. He's always paid his bills with us. Barre's got a fair-sized list working for 7 the city. But there's very few who take real charity. Barre's proud of that record-"

The street was beginning to fill with home-goers after the day's work. Two middle-aged women entered and lingered at a counter that was stacked with men's underwear.

The red-haired clerk smiled. “Hello, Mrs. Hermanos. Hello, Mrs. Miguelo-"